

End of the first-wave free software movement.

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Abstract

A contemporaneous account.

Many movements have gone through the events that free software is currently going through : feminism (I'm not entirely sure what wave we're currently in, that is to say they have been many), Marxism (Marx and Engels, followed by Lenin...), etc.

Usually these transitions happen with the death - physical or symbolic - of their founders or leaders.

But, in none of these cases this meant the end of these movements.

New leaders emerged soon. This was not always for the best... At times their ideas were re-invigorated, at others corrupted.

And, we have known one too many philosophers who published strange books, such as to show that "Socialism and capitalism" (an actual title of a book) could be reconciled...

Already, some of these self-proclaimed thought leaders have in fact emerged in the case of free software : already they want to convince us that free software and the corporate ideology of "open source" are fully compatible and finally ready to be merged.

Like Matt Lee, who will know here is hour of glory and who has been furiously at work on social media these last days. 20 years in the orbit of a superior though singular intellect broke him : he can't be blamed and he should be allowed to live out his anger a little longer...

But, is this really the first-wave, or is the current one already the second or third? Hard to say – so close to the events.

Thomas Bushnell gave an important explanation when he wrote :

"Minsky was RMS's protector for a long long time. He created the AI Lab, where I think RMS found the only happy home he ever knew. He kept the rest of the Institute at bay and insulated RMS from attack (as did other faculty that also had befriended RMS)."

I was in daily contact with Richard Stallman in the months leading up to these events. As in our discussions of the Opioid epidemic, my feelings were that he let his personal experiences blind him.

He was too attached to MIT and its culture.

A symptom of a larger problem in a country dominated by the might of private education, and donations; and exorbitant tuition, debts – all linked. An oddity too when compared with other countries, systems.

Public education ought to be the standard.

This is not to say that this is the only problem here.

Each wave looked back on its predecessors, sometimes harshly : criticisms were formulated, that sometimes helped them become stronger.

Salem Gano made an important contribution to free software, whatever her sociology may turn out to be : images of Richard Stallman's office ("knight for justice (and hot ladies)") are imprinted in everyone's minds now.

These acts belong truly to a bygone, sad age – and even then they had no place and didn't fit. They were never witty, or part of the hacker spirit.

At a critical junction, where technology has an ever greater hold on our lives, free software has never been more important.

It was perhaps always the most important privacy project and the first – though it has not quite been identified as such yet.

We thank our predecessors, and look beyond them.

The next wave will hopefully be more inclusive : of women, of people of color, of poor people, of people with disabilities, and LGBT...

As to the false promises of corporate diversity, a philosophy that has never cost them anything* : their promises of inclusion were always empty. But, for some time to come, still, we will hear their solemn woes "to do better".

How long until social scientists, linguists, historians start dismantling them... The importance of these topics are such that even conservative politicians have caught up to them by now (for reasons that serve their own peculiar interests).

[*It came late, i.e. at a point when it had no negative impact, and when they happened to recruit women – significantly more competent than the rest, as they needed to be – they could in addition claim airs of liberalism. And, who would say no to such a deal...]

[Note : feminist and queer critics seem unaware of Simone de Beauvoir's history, or Michel Foucault's.]

Bibliography

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Note : an article that would later be referenced by Richard Stallman in the CSAIL mailing list exchanges.

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Note : the blog post that started it all.

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Note : a major newspaper picks up the story. Includes a response by Richard Stallman.

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Note : “I worked for RMS longer than any other programmer.” GNU Hurd developer (the crucially missing piece of the GNU system, the kernel).

— Levy, Steven. 18/09. “Richard Stallman and the Fall of the Clueless Nerd”. *Wired*.

Note : author of *Hackers* revises his assessment of history, including his own.

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Note : corporate diversity message.

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